# SEDA Research and Evaluation Small Grants

## Final report

**Name and institution (including the names of any partners in the project)**

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And Jayne Tidd, Teesside University, UK, who helped with the research design and analysis.

**Project title**

**Academics and Professional Teaching Recognition in Middle and Northern Europe*:*** *a case study approach to understanding and learning from similarities and differences*

**Why did you choose the project?**

The idea of professional teaching recognition has been much discussed in the UK over the last 10 years and has become part of the everyday practice for educational developers in UK Universities. However, as chair of the European First Year Experience (EFYE) Conference Organising Committee and EFYE Network, I often work with academics and educational developers from outside the UK, and debates in this wider context have been somewhat less established.

For some while, I had been discussing and exploring the role of academic staff development in embedding good practice in relation to first year experience and students in transition with colleagues globally (I am, for example, on the International Advisory Board for the USA National Resource Center for First Year Experience and Students in Transition). Alongside this I had remained interested in how professional recognition for teaching and supporting learning in HE, now well established in the UK, might be understood and played out in other parts of Europe. A number of conversations with European colleagues led me to realize that some similar questions were being asked in other middle and northern European countries about these two elements of educational development activity.

In part, this interest in other parts of Europe seemed to be coming from a number of policy agendas. According to a European Science Foundation position paper on ‘The Professionalisation of Academics as Teachers in Higher Education’, Ireland, Nordic Countries, Belgium and the Netherlands, along with the UK had all had fairly recent “national level policy initiatives” on the professional development of teachers (Pleschova et al, 2012, p.11). Aspects of the Bologna project had also highlighted the role of HE teachers, developing academics to use learning centred-teaching, and the impact of lecturers on learning transitions. National statements were being made in some of these countries about commitments to enhancing the quality of teaching, e.g. in Norway in 2016, the education minister promised that improvements to the quality of teaching at university would be ‘a cornerstone of the government education programme.’ (Myklebust, 2016).

But how this all translated on the ground for academics and developers in these countries was perhaps less well understood, and the colleagues I had spoken to from other countries provided mixed accounts.

In the light of these conversations, my own areas of interest, and the implications of European policy agendas in this regard, I decided to undertake a case study research project that would look at professional teaching recognition in different European settings alongside investigating what kinds of educational development activities might be in place specifically to support lecturers teaching and supporting first year students and students in transition.

The project was developed in collaboration with the European First Year Experience Conference Organising Committee (see partners above), which has representation from a number of countries involved. As a result I saw the project as a genuine European endeavor. It provided an opportunity to share good practice and learn from each other across middle and Northern Europe about educational development.

The Committee and the EFYE Conference provided a source for the research sample, which was drawn from universities which have participated in EFYE Conferences, and therefore are already engaged with debates about FYE, but they had not necessarily considered issues of professional recognition.

**What you did and how it was carried out**

The aim of this project was to compare staff development approaches and routes to recognition for lecturers in HE across a number of countries in mid and Northern Europe. The broader intention was also to identify good practice, and to explore what academic development for HE teaching might look like in different contexts.

The project involved mixed methods, but used a case study approach. A short online survey was distributed to institutions across middle and Northern Europe, case study respondents were identified through the survey, and interviews were completed via Skype with two members of staff from each of the case study institutions (one member of academic staff who had participated in educational development and an educational developer). The case study institutions also provided relevant institutional documentation.

The survey was developed in, and distributed using, Bristol Online Surveys. The aim of the survey was to gather specific information on understandings of professional recognition for lecturers and some information on relevant academic/teaching staff development activities. The survey was tested by readers in Finland, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium and the U.K and adapted to ensure the language was transferable to different national settings. It was also piloted by two different non U.K. institutions.

The survey was shared across a number of HE institutions in each of the following countries: Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the UK. Responses were received from 7 of these 8 countries.

5 institutions across 5 countries were identified for the case study interviews: Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Netherlands, and the UK. The interview design was semi-structured and shaped by the literature and the survey data. Consent forms were signed by all participants.

Analysis was undertaken using a thematic approach. Themes were drawn from the literature, the survey data and the interviews.

**What have you learnt from doing this work?**

**Findings**

*This is a summary of the key findings. More details of the outcomes of the project will be presented in articles currently in development. Some of these findings have also been discussed in 2 conference papers and one article already submitted (see section below)*

National priorities across Europe are creating some push towards professional teaching recognition, but are producing quite varied responses, and these can vary at institutional or even department level. While this development is a positive move, it is unclear at this stage how this will impact on teaching practice or student learning experiences on the ground.

However, the case study conversations highlighted the importance of ongoing development for lecturers, and explored the ways in which they are developing their professional identities throughout their career, whether they receive formal recognition or not, as also noted by Korhonen and Törmä (2014) *'Professional growth is kept up by constant reflection and reassessment, through which the individual builds her/his role, fixes goals for changing situations in their career, recognises the necessary development challenges and constructs alternative practices.’* (p.79). Some respondents did speak eloquently about their desire for more formal recognition for their teaching, as well as their research. There was evidence in the literature too of some innovative examples to supporting teaching agendas in research universities in Northern Europe (e.g. see Pyörälä, 2015)

Some institutions in some European countries are committed to aligning teaching recognition and reward with research recognition and reward, but this comes with a number of challenges. Some of the academics interviewed, particularly those in research institutions talked about the difficulties with this in practice. (Gunn and Fisk 2013)

Excellence in relation to teaching seems to be translated into notions of ‘good practice’; at least for some respondents in this study, when they were asked explicitly about excellence they tended to talk about more ordinary good practice examples (e.g. flipped classroom; getting to know your students; providing real world examples). In general, too, the educational developers in middle and northern Europe interviewed in this study seemed to be more interested in ways to support everyday good practice, and found the notion of excellence less helpful for working with staff.

However, excellent individuals are now recognised in a number of settings. Many middle and Northern European institutions had annual awards for ‘outstanding’ teachers, and these were often chosen by, or with, students.

A range of support and development activities are provided to help lecturers (particularly those new to teaching) with their HE teaching. Some countries and some institutions have formal programmes, including examples with academic credits, although these latter seem very rare outside the UK. Some institutions are currently developing formal programmes for lecturers new to teaching. Optional development activities of a variety of kinds were common across the research sample – annual events, or local conferences are a popular approach; plus workshops and networks.

First year experience and supporting student transitions are not specifically included in staff development for lecturers/HE teachers in most contexts, although there were some examples of good practice.

It was interesting to note that some development work, particularly in relation to specific areas, like FYE or transitions, is done through organisational processes rather than explicit staff development, so for example respondents mentioned the role of working groups and being on organising committees, as well as identifying situations where educational developers were working with department leads to support change.

There was little evidence of the involvement of students in activities designed to develop staff who teach, apart from one example in the UK case study, and the role of students in the annual award schemes mentioned above.

**How have you told others about your work?**

Two papers have been presented at two conferences, these were:

Diane Nutt and Jayne Tidd, *Striving for teaching excellence beyond the UK: what can we learn from middle and northern Europe*, presented at SEDA Spring Conference, Manchester, March 2017.

Diane Nutt, *Developing lecturers to teach and support first year students in middle & Northern Europe: sharing good practice from a case study research project*, presented at the European First Year Experience Conference, Birmingham City University, Birmingham, June 2017.

An article has been submitted to the SEDA magazine, Educational Developments, with the provisional title: *Developing Lecturers to Teach and Support First Year Students and Students in Transition in Middle & Northern Europe.*

**What effect has it had and where is this activity now heading?**

Responses to the paper at the EFYE Conference has led to subsequent discussions with the EFYEN and the EFYE Conference Organising Committee about the development of an award to recognise lecturers and educational developers good practice in relation to first year experience. The EFYEN is also exploring webinars on a variety of topics and it is likely that one of these will be about good practice in developing staff in relation to FYE and transitions.

A second article is currently being developed focusing on the findings relating to professional recognition. As a HEA accreditor, I am also aiming to share the findings with other accreditors and have already had initial conversations about the project with the recognition team at the HEA. Some non-UK participants in the study were interested in both SEDA’s educational development resources and the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF), and material has been shared with them after the interview process was complete.

**References**

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Mykelbust, J.P. (2016) Improving teaching quality moves to top of agenda, in *University World News,* Issue 00396, 14 January 2016

Pyörälä, E., et al. (2015) Significant networks and meaningful conversations observed in the first round applicants for the Teachers’ Academy at a research intensive university, *International Journal for Academic Development,* 20:2, 150-162

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